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Operational activities of the United Nations for international development cooperation: progress report on the implementation of the triennial comprehensive policy review

Assessing the effectiveness of the operational activities for development of the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General**

Summary

The present report responds to paragraph 53 of General Assembly resolution 56/201, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to continue to provide, in the context of the triennial comprehensive policy review, an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the operational activities for development of the United Nations system and the functioning of the United Nations development system at the country level. An indicative work programme is outlined. Issues of methodology are summarized in sections IV to VIII. Future assessments will be independent, impartial and participatory. Key concepts are national ownership and the involvement of priority beneficiaries and of the resident coordinator system and system organizations. Capacity for those overall assessments should be strengthened. The report complements the information contained in the report of the Secretary-General on operational activities for development of the United Nations system (E/2002/47 and Add.1 and 2).

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly has provided policy guidance to the United Nations system in the area of operational activities for development since 1977,[1] when the first sessions dealing formally with the topic are recorded. Since 1980, that role has been performed through the triennial comprehensive policy review, for which the Secretariat provides policy analysis on the basis of appropriate documentation.[2] The triennial review process leads to the adoption of key resolutions,[3] which have been followed up systematically by annual progress reviews by the Economic and Social Council.[4]

2. The triennial review resolutions established the fundamental principles, concepts, modalities and follow-up mechanisms that regulate the functioning of the United Nations system at the country level. Changes in the way in which United Nations country teams now work together and with their partners testify to the relevance of those resolutions and their impact on country-level activities.

3. The role of the Secretariat in the triennial review process has been to provide Member States with relevant, impartial and reliable documentation, policy analysis and recommendations on the functioning of the United Nations system-wide support to development.

4. In paragraph 53 of its resolution 56/201, the General Assembly confirmed that analytical role of the Secretariat by requesting the Secretary-General to continue to provide, in the context of the triennial review, an overall assessment of the effectiveness of the system's operational activities for development and of the functioning of the United Nations development system at the country level. The purpose of the present report[5] is to respond to the request of the Assembly to submit to the Council in 2002 suggestions to enhance such assessments, reiterating the objectives and criteria that drive them and laying out a collaborative strategy that will continue to involve the entire United Nations system, recipient countries and donor community. The report provides an outline for an indicative work programme for consideration of the Council. Issues of methodology are reviewed and summarized in sections IV-VIII. The report complements the information included in the report of the Secretary-General on operational activities for development of the United Nations system (E/2002/47 and Add.1 and 2).

II. The concept of assessment and its purpose

5. The overall assessment function outlined in the present report involves a systematic and objective analysis of the mechanisms for designing and implementing operational activities and the results of those activities. Its purpose is to consider the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability of those activities and their modalities, and the capacity of the United Nations development system to achieve its objectives.[6] The ultimate aim of the assessment function is to improve the performance of the United Nations system in achieving its objectives for development cooperation.

6. "Assessment" can have several meanings in aid evaluation, depending on the contexts and whether it is applied to project, programme or strategic/policy analysis.[7] The overall assessments being discussed here are system-wide. They are concerned with trends rather than any specific activities and their implementation. As such, their scope and focus is different from appraisals or evaluations of projects or programmes, and from assessments intended as financial or operational monitoring. All those meanings are most relevant to agency-specific evaluation work rather than system-wide assessments.

7. To be policy-relevant, assessments of the country-level functioning of the United Nations development system require not only a historical knowledge of past achievements but also addressing the system's capacity to move forward as a catalyst for change. They recognize patterns, signs of change and trends, and address the capacity of the system to adjust to changing circumstances.[8] Therefore, those assessments should be continuous and dynamic rather than exclusively or even primarily ex post facto.

8. As noted above, the focus should be on synergies and coherence within the United Nations system, and not on performance of individual organizations and agency-specific operations or programmes or groups of programmes, although the contribution of each organization to overall results and the comparative analysis of various agencies as regards specific system-wide issues may be pertinent. Thorough agency-specific evaluations belong to each organization and their internal evaluation mechanisms. The assessment work of the Secretariat being dealt with here should not

The assessment function for operational activities for development

- The Secretariat provides the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council with relevant, impartial and reliable documentation, policy analysis and recommendations on the functioning of United Nations system-wide support to development.
- The main purpose of the assessment function is to help those two organs of the United Nations base their work as regards operational activities for development on lessons learned from experience, while ensuring accountability of the United Nations development system.
- The assessments of operational activities are systematic and objective evaluations, which are intended to: (a) verify the value or utility of operational activities for development, (b) determine the capacity of the United Nations development system to be a catalyst for change and adjust to changing circumstances, (c) verify the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability of its operational activities for development and their evolution, and (d) make use of lessons learned from assessments and agency evaluations to provide policy guidance to the system.
- The assessments of operational activities for development focus on system-wide dimensions of those activities, and on synergies, coordination, collaboration and coherence within the United Nations system at the country level.
- Country-level effectiveness of the United Nations development system has two complementary and inseparable dimensions: process and substance (development). The assessments deal with both at the same time in order to optimize the use of country-level mechanisms and modalities employed by the system to pursue development objectives.
- The indicative assessment programme regarding operational activities for development outlined in the present report focuses on the priority areas identified by General Assembly resolution 56/201, grouped in three main clusters:

  (a) Integration of operational activities with national development efforts;

  (b) Rationalization and enhanced functioning of United Nations development system at the country level;

  (c) Global and regional dimensions of operational activities.
- Key concepts for the assessments are national ownership of operational activities for development, their integration with national efforts and the involvement of priority beneficiaries in the development process, which are necessary conditions for the effectiveness, impact and sustainability of those activities.

- Future assessments need to be independent and impartial, participatory and rigorous.
- Participation in the assessments involves:
  (a) Recipient countries, their Governments, other public authorities and relevant parts of civil society;
  (b) Resident coordinator systems at the country level and United Nations system organizations at headquarters (including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF));
  (c) Other development partners (other multilateral and regional organizations and key bilateral donors).
- The approach and methodology for carrying out the indicative assessment programme will be developed taking into account and drawing upon the evaluation processes and experience of system organizations, in close consultation with the the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and the rest of the system.
- The Secretariat needs to strengthen its capacity to undertake assessments of operational activities, relying on a wider support of technical skills from the United Nations system, and external professional contributions from qualified experts and research centres of excellence of international reputation.

duplicate those efforts. Nevertheless, the interaction between system-wide and agency-specific evaluations is important since lessons learned from both may be of mutual use[9] and may complement each other.[10]

9. Similarly, the process and substantive dimensions of those assessments should be seen as complementary.[11] Process dimensions relate to modalities and mechanisms, and include issues of consistency, harmonization, country-level coordination and internal synergies within the system. Substantive dimensions have to do with the development contribution of the United Nations system and its relevance for the recipient countries. Member States highlighted both dimensions in guiding and making use of the Secretariat's analyses, although delegations may differ in where they place emphasis.

10. In drawing up the agenda for the assessments outlined below and devising an effective balance between the dimensions and their linkages, the Secretariat has been guided by a number of considerations as to the "primary users" of the assessments and the main purposes they are intended to serve. The primary users of the assessments are the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. The main purpose of the assessment function should be to provide policy-analysis support to the work of those two organs of the United Nations when considering operational activities for development of the United Nations system so as to ensure that their debates, deliberations and resolutions[12] can benefit from policy-relevant, balanced and objective assessments of the mechanisms and modalities employed to undertake United Nations system's operational activities and their contribution to solve the development problems that those activities are intended to address.

11. The assessments should help both the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council in their guidance to the United Nations system in relation to both process and substantive dimensions and their relationship. Their findings as well as lessons learned from the past experience of development cooperation (the *learning dimension*) should eventually be translated into their recommendations addressed to the United Nations system. They should, at the same time, assist those bodies in fulfilling their oversight

responsibilities (the *accountability dimension*) through assessment of the United Nations system's performance as regards both its operational activities and its country-level functions.[13]

12. In addition to the Council and the Assembly, other possible interlocutors may benefit from the assessments: individual system organizations, their evaluation offices, their inter-agency mechanisms (the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board (CEB)), recipient countries, donor countries, other multilateral organizations, non-governmental organizations and other civil society organizations. Although they are not the direct users of those evaluations, the relevance and usefulness of those assessments for that second group of potential beneficiaries should not be neglected.

13. A by-product of the assessments is to facilitate — by fostering transparency and accountability of the system — the mobilization of international support for the development function of the United Nations, by providing additional evidence of relevance and credibility of the work of its operational arm.

III. An agenda for the assessments: an outline for an indicative work programme

14. The "effectiveness" of operational activities for development can be defined as the capability of the United Nations system to support recipient countries in achieving better development results, integrating internationally agreed development objectives in concrete national contexts, with full respect for the ultimate responsibility of each recipient country to determine the development priorities of its own policies and programmes.

15. In the sixth preambular paragraph of its resolution 56/201, the General Assembly suggests that the effectiveness of operational activities should be assessed by their impact on poverty eradication, economic growth and sustainable development of recipient countries, as set out in the commitments, goals and targets of the United Nations Millennium Declaration and the major United Nations conferences.[14] In other parts of the resolution, it is possible to equate the concept of effectiveness with that of development relevance of the operational activities.[15]

16. In paragraph 53 of the resolution, the General Assembly also requests that the effectiveness evaluation be conducted in the priority areas identified in the resolution. Therefore, the assessment function will address such questions as:

(a) Are the objectives pursued by operational activities for development and the United Nations system at the country level coherent and consistent with international goals, such as the millennium development goals and national priorities, and are those activities effective?

(b) Are operational activities for development well targeted?[16] Do system-wide processes, such as the common country assessment and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) facilitate targeting, better relating the system's choices to the millennium development goals and national development priorities?[17]

(c) Is the demand by recipient countries for development support from the United Nations system evolving? Is the response of the system evolving as well? Does the United Nations system have the capacity, also through its country structures and its modalities, to provide an adequate response?

(d) Is the United Nations system learning from past experience of development cooperation to enhance quality and focus of its operations?

(e) Are operational activities for development nationally owned? Are they integrated with national efforts?[18] Are the target groups of beneficiaries of development cooperation efforts involved in the development efforts?

(f) What is the role of operational activities in enhancing capacity-building in the recipient countries?[19]

(g) What is the progress in the effort to rationalize the functioning of the United Nations system at the country level[20] and better coordinate its activities?[21]

(h) What is the role of operational activities in the context of the ongoing globalization processes?[22] How relevant and effective are they in that larger context? How are a gender dimension[23] or regional considerations[24] mainstreamed in the operational

activities? Is technical cooperation among developing countries making any progress in the design and implementation of operational activities?[25]

17. These are elements of a possible agenda for the assessments called for in paragraph 53 of resolution 56/201. A more complete list of priority thematic areas identified in the resolution is contained in annex II to the present report and in the report of the Secretary-General on the management process for the implementation of the resolution (E/2002/47/Add.2).

18. Future evaluation activities for the overall assessment of operational activities for development of the United Nations system will be organized along those lines, following the indicative work programme, outlined in the present report. The thematic focuses of the assessments reflected in the work programme have been grouped into three distinct clusters: (a) integration of operational activities with national development efforts; (b) rationalization and enhanced functioning of the United Nations development system at the country level; and (c) global and regional dimensions of operational activities.

Cluster 1
Integration of operational activities with national development efforts

19. Assessments in cluster 1 will look at the overall effectiveness of operational activities and the link between them, as well as such issues as national ownership, governance and capacity-building, considering both process and substantive dimensions.

Cluster 2
Rationalization and enhanced functioning of the United Nations development system at the country level

20. Issues under cluster 2[26] are the backbone of the assessment of the functioning of the United Nations development system at the country level, stressing such dimensions as country-level collaboration, coordination, harmonization, consistency and synergy. They include strategic instruments, such as the common country assessment and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), the simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures, the resident coordinator system, thematic groups and joint programming. The links between the process and substantive dimensions (development relevance) of those issues are at the core of the assessment function in this area.

Cluster 3
Global and regional dimensions of operational activities

21. Areas in cluster 3 include links of operational activities with the United Nations Millennium Declaration and follow-up to global conferences and related goals; links with key manifestations of globalization, including trade, finance, information and communication technologies, and social dimensions; regional and subregional dimensions of operational activities; dynamic changes in the operational activities for development; as well as possible interaction with some other issues indicated under cluster 2 (e.g., the millennium development goals as objectives for the United Nations system and the evaluation of the common country assessment and UNDAF).

22. This indicative work programme will be further specified and operationalized on the basis of the recommendations of the Council and the consultations that the Secretariat is holding with Member States and the United Nations system organizations.

IV. Results-based management and effectiveness assessment

23. United Nations system organizations, like other multilateral and bilateral institutions engaged in development cooperation,[27] have made great efforts to reform their management systems, introducing results-based management or performance approaches. The introduction of multi-year funding frameworks has also been linked to progress in the establishment of results-based management systems. Comprehensively applied results-based management should also be consistent with the more extensive use of the programme approach (as opposed to the project approach), stressing the outcome of development cooperation instead of its inputs.[28]

24. Since results-based management favours a more strategic approach to planning, it can potentially enhance the quality of the United Nations system's assessments, especially with progress in the use of the common country assessment and UNDAF and the improvement of their quality[29] and the individual agency programmes, which they comprise.

25. The request to the Secretary-General, contained in paragraph 56 of resolution 56/201, to conduct an impartial and independent assessment of the United Nations system's use of lessons learned from evaluation activities, will stimulate further opportunities to examine progress by the system in making use of strategic and programme-wide evaluations.[30]

26. While those prospects are encouraging, it should be noted that the use of results-based management in system-wide approaches and strategic planning is still at its initial stage, and its full use for assessments of the operational activities for development may, in the immediate future, still be hindered by inadequacy of data and experience at the country level, methodological obstacles and the need to reflect results-based management in the common country assessment and UNDAF processes.

V. Impartiality and independence

27. Impartiality and independence are considered important factors in ensuring the credibility of any assessment or evaluation function. Both the Assembly and the Council should be able to rely on impartial information and dependable sources and methodologically unbiased analyses. The independence of that function from the management structures that are in charge of planning and executing operational activities ensures its legitimacy and avoids potential conflict of interest. Transparency, frankness and openness should be components of the communication from the Secretariat to Member States.[31]

28. The credibility of and accountability for the assessment function require that a clearly identifiable, single office assume responsibility for undertaking it on behalf of the Secretary-General, who has ultimate responsibility for the substantive servicing of intergovernmental bodies. That also ensures a balanced approach based on the broad consensus reflected in the resolutions on triennial comprehensive policy reviews. On that basis, the Secretariat function for undertaking the overall assessments is exercised by a unit which is part of the structure of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which is itself responsible for substantive support to the General Assembly and Economic and Social Council and is not as such involved in operational activities.[32] Its assessment function is undertaken separately from coordinating structures, such as UNDG and CEB (as well as its predecessor, ACC), although the unit concern actively collaborates with both structures.

29. However, as the evaluation literature demonstrates,[33] an excessive emphasis on independence in all aspects of the process, even if desirable to promote transparency and accountability, can be counterproductive and can damage the climate of collaboration and partnership with system organizations and national Governments, discouraging their ownership of the evaluation results. It is therefore essential that assessments are carried out in consultation and collaboration with all relevant partners at each stage, and that results are shared with and acted on by them.

30. The notion of independence here is consistent with the use of external sources of research excellence (research centres, universities, etc.), which can be used to provide substantive support and technical inputs to the assessment work. Use of such sources of excellence, which have expertise of the required quality and background, is one means to enhance credibility and reliability of the assessment work. In that case, the combination of the responsibility for the Secretary-General's report on the triennial review, the transparency of the process of preparing and carrying out the assessment, the consultation with Member States and the United Nations system, the use of centres of excellence and independent and balanced expert advice, and the prompt diffusion of any results to public and academic scrutiny should all tend towards a high quality, balanced and useful product.

VI. Participatory approach

31. An essential condition to enhance quality is the establishment of an effective dialogue with the key interlocutors that intervene in the development cooperation relationships, adopting a participatory approach to the evaluation.

32. Whereas the credibility of the assessments requires the organizational independence of the assessment function, their relevance requires that their outcome (findings and conclusions) take into account the views of relevant stakeholders, who are expected to be more actively involved in the evaluation process through consultations and various other forms of

participation.[34] Such participation applies to the following interlocutors:

(a) Recipient countries, their Governments, other public authorities and relevant parts of the civil society;

(b) The United Nations country teams and the resident coordinator system for each country (including organizations with no country representation and, where relevant, the World Bank and IMF);

(c) Other external partners represented at the country level, including other multilateral and regional development or financial organizations, key bilateral donors and their agencies.[35]

33. The principle of a participatory approach also requires the direct involvement of representatives of headquarters of system organizations in the preparation of the assessment work, including an active response from their evaluation units.

VII. Some lessons from the past

34. The experience of the last 12 years in assessing operational activities and the two series of impact evaluations undertaken in response to the General Assembly's requests in its resolutions 50/120 and 53/192, show that future assessments may benefit, both methodologically and operationally, from the lessons learned and insights gained from the experience.[36]

35. It may be noted that the impact evaluations were one of an array of sources for the knowledge and policy analysis for the Secretary-General's reports on operational activities. The last three reports for the triennial review made considerable progress in suggesting criteria for making judgments about the effectiveness of operational activities. They focused on the dynamic processes that the United Nations system support to development has helped to set in motion. The attention on changing processes is an achievement that should be further consolidated through a continuation of efforts to stress such dimensions as coherence, directions, dynamics and relevance. At the present stage, there is scope for an important contribution from the United Nations system, notably the specialized agencies, in suggesting concrete criteria and indicators for judging the effectiveness and impacts of their operational activities, drawing on their particular stores of expertise and experience. Future assessments will seek to benefit from that relatively untapped potential.

36. Those studies also brought to light some methodological and organizational difficulties that are intrinsic in evaluation efforts in this area. Future orientations of the overall assessment function may benefit from the lessons learned in those exercises.[37] One of the major obstacles faced by an overall assessment of the operational activities is the breadth and complexity of the problems addressed in order to identify the "impact" of the United Nations system. There is little agreement on common standards to identify achievements or a universally accepted methodology for system-wide country-level evaluations, making it difficult to compare performance across regions and countries. All-encompassing concepts of development impact of operational activities, including their impact on capacity-building and/or poverty eradication, could not be easily observed and monitored through synthetic indicators.[38]

VIII. Multiplicity of tools and approaches

37. The methodology for conducting overall assessments in the area of operational activities is based on a multiplicity of analytical tools, instruments and approaches, including desk reviews, universal collection of information and extensive consultations from all system organizations (both at the headquarters and country levels), Member States (both donors and recipients) and other sources. Taking into account the fact that evidence of the effectiveness of operational activities is available most widely at the country level,[39] those instruments are complemented with other consultative processes: field missions, in-country workshops, subregional and regional consultative meetings, sample analysis, cross-country studies, thematic background studies, and ad hoc consultative gatherings (retreats, workshops, seminars, conferences, panels).[40] A combination of a selective use of some of those instruments and a joint effort to analyse the results of evaluation of system organizations should help to move the overall assessment function into a new phase of greater relevance and applicability of results.[41]

38. Future evaluations need to ensure that:

(a) The conditions of independence and impartiality analysed in section V above are fully met;

(b) The assessments are conducted using a fully participatory approach, focusing on collaborative consultative processes;

(c) The assessments are prepared and conducted meeting rigorous methodological standards;[42]

(d) The functional capacity to undertake those tasks is strengthened, by relying on wider use of human resources and the expertise available within the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations system, and accessing the external services of qualified consultants and research centres of excellent reputation, as required;

(e) Adequate financial resources are made available, both through the regular budget and extrabudgetary contributions, in order to carry out the overall assessment function.

39. The participatory approach of the assessment would include the following arrangements:

(a) Full involvement of Governments of the developing countries, United Nations system organizations and other national and international stakeholders, also through intensive use of networks;

(b) Follow-up mechanisms (online debates or other interactive initiatives with national Governments and United Nations system organizations, possibly extended to other partners);

(c) Better feedback from both recipient countries and system organizations on lessons learned through the assessments;

(d) Promotion of a series of country and regional assessment activities and consultation processes leading to a comprehensive assessment at the end of the three-year triennial review cycle.

40. The assessments undertaken by the Secretariat could be complemented with a series of other alternative initiatives:[43]

(a) Self-assessment processes promoted by Governments or local communities, supported by the United Nations system;

(b) Evaluation studies of the system-wide impact of operational activities, undertaken by national authorities and country teams;

(c) Concurrent or parallel evaluations promoted by other international actors (bilateral donors or international financial institutions) in programme areas of specific interest;

(d) Other capacity-building initiatives in the area of monitoring and evaluation.

Notes

[1] See General Assembly resolution 32/197, in particular para. 5 (d) and sect. V on operational activities in the annex.

[2] See General Assembly resolution 35/81.

[3] In the last 12 years, resolutions that represent major breakthroughs in this area are General Assembly resolutions 44/211, 47/199, 50/120, 53/192 and 56/201.

[4] See General Assembly resolution 48/162, which concentrated the work of the Assembly on operational activities in the triennial review years, attributing the responsibility of the annual progress reviews to the Economic and Social Council only. It is indeed only starting from 1993 that the Council — responding to its oversight role on the system operations in the economic and social domain — has become the place to conduct annual progress reviews of the implementation of Assembly resolutions on operational activities. Before 1993, the Assembly also used to have, in addition to the triennial review, annual sessions on operational activities for progress reviews.

[5] In paragraph 53 of its resolution 56/201, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Economic and Social Council, at its substantive session of 2002, in consultation with Member States and on the basis of the experience acquired with the impact evaluation studies, suggestions on how to strengthen the modalities and enhance the approach for such an overall assessment, particularly in the areas identified in the resolution.

[6] See sect. IV on the concept of effectiveness assumed in General Assembly resolution 56/201. Effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability and relevance of development cooperation activities are fundamental criteria in any evaluation of development assistance activities. Several system organizations and other multilateral and bilateral agencies make use of them. See, for example, the results of a workshop conducted in Vienna in 1999 by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)/Development

Assistance Committee (DAC), which singled out their use in evaluating the country programmes of both bilateral donors and some multilateral agencies, in DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation, "Evaluating country programmes", (Paris, 1999), issue No. 2 of the OECD/DAC Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness series. For their extensive use within bilateral agencies, see, for example, Danish Agency for Development Assistance, "Guidelines for evaluation", (February 1994), and Spain, Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, "Methodology of evaluation for the Spanish Cooperation" (June 1998). Those evaluation criteria are often formulated in a way that they only apply to project-level evaluations, although they have been extensively used also in the evaluation of programmes, sectors, country programmes, specific aid forms or modalities and in thematic evaluations.

[7] There is an extensive literature on this issue; for a traditional classification of various definitions of impact assessment as used in multilateral development assistance, see, for example, United Kingdom Department for International Development, "Impact assessment in multilateral development institutions" (London, August 1998), box 1.1.

[8] The Secretary-General reports for the triennial review in 1995, 1998 and 2001 focused on the evolution of United Nations development support to developing countries and its trends in order to provide better policy guidance for the future, thereby confirming that dynamic approach in assessing the system.

[9] The Secretariat is expected to make the fullest use of the evaluations and studies launched by United Nations system organizations, intensifying its interaction with their evaluation units or offices and with the Inter-Agency Working Group on Evaluation.

[10] Such interaction with the evaluation experience applies also to other actors, in particular development institutions, such as other multilateral institutions and bilateral donors, relevant entities in recipient countries, development research institutions of international standing, both from the North and the South, academic institutions, and individual scholars or development experts of confirmed international reputation. It should also include the work on aid effectiveness undertaken by the DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation.

[11] Processes in operational activities are not ends in themselves. Analysing them as if they were would obviously distort any assessment exercise and greatly limit its policy relevance. At the same time, the focus of the work of the Assembly and the Council when debating operational activities is not on development policies as such but on ways and means through which the system can contribute to the development processes in recipient countries by letting its operational arm adopt appropriate mechanisms and modalities. In the past 12 years, both dimensions -- process and substance — have been addressed in the analysis conducted by the Secretariat as essential components of the assessment.

[12] The Secretariat is also responsible to help disseminate the principles and concepts agreed by the Assembly and the Council in their resolutions to the United Nations system, as part of its responsibility for monitoring the implementation of those resolutions.

[13] Both learning and accountability are key purposes of all evaluation activities in the area of development cooperation, as recognized at the international level; see, for example, OECD/DAC, "Principles for evaluation of development assistance" (Paris, 1991), sect. II, "Purpose of evaluation" (OECD/GD (91) 208), and DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation, "Evaluation feedback for effective learning and accountability" (Paris, 2001), issue No. 5 of the OECD/DAC Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness series.

[14] The concept is reinforced by operative paragraph 8, of the resolution, in which the General Assembly also stresses that the United Nations development system should assist programme countries in addressing the goals and targets identified by the Millennium Declaration and the outcomes and commitments of relevant major United Nations conferences, in the context of the current challenges and opportunities of globalization. From the text of the fifth preambular paragraph of the resolution, it is clear that the General Assembly refers to "impact" and "effectiveness" as interchangeable concepts in the resolution.

[15] Paragraph 9 of the resolution highlights the need to improve the functioning and the impact of the operational activities for development of the United Nations system, and stresses the need of increasing the relevance of the United Nations operational activities for development.

[16] See World Bank, "The role and effectiveness of development assistance: lessons from World Bank experience", research paper submitted to the International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, Mexico, 16-22 March 2002.

[17] See United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Development effectiveness: review of evaluation evidence" (November 2001).

[18] See, for example, UNDP, loc. cit., chap. IV; see also para. 7 of General Assembly resolution 56/201, which stresses that the United Nations development system, in order to ensure national ownership of its operational activities for development, should integrate its country-level operations with national policies and programmes for development and poverty eradication, including, as appropriate, national poverty reduction strategies, under the leadership of the Government.

[19] Section III of General Assembly resolution 56/201 (paras. 28–32) is devoted to the promotion of capacity-building, as the lead objective of operational activities.

[20] See, for example, the seventh preambular paragraph of General Assembly resolution 56/201, which highlights the importance of the efforts undertaken to rationalize and to improve the functioning and impact of United Nations funds, programmes and specialized agencies.

[21] See General Assembly resolution 56/201, para. 5.

[22] Ibid., paras. 11 and 13.

[23] Ibid., paras. 85 and 87.

[24] Ibid., sect. XII, para. 88, and analogous provisions of previous resolutions.

[25] Ibid., sect. XIII.

[26] They are the main concerns on operational activities for most Member States, in particular donors, although recipient countries have also repeatedly manifested interest in this area (e.g., on such issues as transaction costs and harmonization of procedures).

[27] For an overview of this experience, see Annette Binnendijk "Results-based management in the development cooperation agencies: a review of experience", executive summary, DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation (Paris, 2001); available on the web site of OECD/DAC.

[28] See UNDP, loc. cit.

[29] Results-based management may facilitate system-wide evaluations of operational activities for development, if they provide clearer evidence of well-defined objectives or results, greater use of observable and where possible measurable indicators to measure progress, established baselines with explicit targets for each of them, thereby facilitating performance monitoring of the various components of the system. The evaluation of the common country assessment and UNDAF requested for the year 2004 represents an opportunity to measure progress in that direction.

[30] Through that evaluation and the assessment of the common country assessment and UNDAF for 2004, it will also be possible to review progress in the evaluation of the country programmes by each agency and its possible interaction with system-wide exercises. On that issue see the results of a workshop conducted in Vienna in 1999 by OECD/DAC, which reviewed the experience in evaluating country programmes, both among bilateral donors and some multilateral agencies, in DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation, "Evaluating country programmes" (Paris, 1999), issue No. 2 of the OECD/DAC Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness series.

[31] That point was also made in the context the OECD/DAC reflection on the evaluation feedback from political audiences, such as parliaments, ministers and governing bodies of multilateral agencies. See on this point, DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation "Evaluation feedback for effective learning and accountability" chap. 4. This is in conformity with the DAC principles of evaluation. See OECD/DAC, "Principles for evaluation of development assistance" (Paris, November 1991, sect. III).

[32] This unit is the Development Cooperation Policy Branch of the Division for Economic and Social Council Support and Coordination.

[33] See, for example, DAC Working Party on Aid Evaluation, "Evaluation feedback for effective learning and accountability" (Paris, 2001), and OECD/DAC, "Review of the DAC principles for evaluation of development assistance" (Paris, 1998). The latter noted that the principle of independence can be overplayed. As the users of evaluations have pointed out, too much independence, in practice, can be self-defeating, with the result that recommendations and lessons of evaluation are not taken seriously. The principle of independence has to be balanced with the interest in promoting ownership of the evaluation products and their recommendations. At the same time, if accountability and not lessons is the primary purpose of an evaluation, then the independence function is critical.

[34] That point was clearly stated in OECD/DAC, "Review of the DAC principles for evaluation of development assistance" (Paris, 1998).

[35] Participation of all those partners in the assessment function can take different forms, from simple consultation and involvement in joint meetings to a direct involvement in the assessment work in the forms of joint, collaborative, participatory and parallel evaluations, including joint United Nations/multi-donor evaluations, donor/recipient/United Nations evaluations, United Nations/recipient evaluations, United Nations/recipient/NGOs evaluations. Concerning some of those modalities, their potentials and their difficulties, see, for example, DAC, "Effective practices in conducting a multi-donor evaluation" (Paris, 2000), issue No. 4 of the OECD/DAC Evaluation and Aid Effectiveness series.

[36] In both resolutions, the Secretary-General was requested to undertake an evaluation of the impact of operational activities. The two series of country-level studies, conducted in 12 countries, focused in the first series on capacity-building and in the second on capacity-building and poverty eradication. Those studies were made in response to the demand of the General Assembly — in the triennial reviews of 1995 and 1998 — to complement the evaluation of the modalities and mechanisms that regulate the functioning of the system at the country level with an assessment of the development impact of operational activities.

[37] See also W. H. North, "Impact evaluations and the United Nations system", in *Capacity-building and Poverty Eradication: Some Analysis of and Lessons from Evaluations of United Nations system support to countries' efforts* (United Nations publication, forthcoming). Haven North is the former Chairman of the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation and former head of the United States Agency for International Development Center for Development Information and Evaluation. See also R. Maconick, "Evaluating the impact of operational activities: some observations on the evaluation issues" in R. Maconick, ed., *Capacity-building Supported by the United Nations: Some Evaluations and Some Lessons* (New York, United Nations, 1999).

[38] At the country level, the information base on operational activities available was often inadequate and so was the system's institutional memory. The time period covered by those studies turned out to create problems for those preparing the evaluations and those carrying them out because of the non-availability of old records and knowledgeable people with good memories. The attribution of results to external contributions from the United Nations system was often impossible. Some of those difficulties were due to the way in which individual studies had been planned, with different coverage of programme activities and different sets of problems, situations and sectors, which made it impossible to conduct cross-country comparisons. Sometimes, the contribution of country teams to the preparation phase of those studies was inadequate in terms of the participatory approach to evaluation suggested in the present report in spite of the attempts to include national counterparts and beneficiary groups.

[39] The above-mentioned study of the World Bank on aid effectiveness concludes that because each country is unique, the role of aid can be understood best through careful analysis of individual countries.

[40] The 1990s offered a wide range of examples of joint consultations of this type, with the presence of headquarters and country-level representatives of United Nations system organizations, recipient Governments, donors and civil society. They were promoted by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs or its predecessors, often in collaboration with inter-agency mechanisms (either UNDG or, in the past, the ACC Consultative Committee on Programme and Operational Questions, currently replaced by the High-Level Committee on Programmes of CEB). They were functional to the discussion of results of evaluation missions and formulate system-wide guidelines to be implemented within the system or to suggest recommendations to the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council. Specific examples of the consultations are those that addressed such topics as national execution, the programme approach, the country strategy note, UNDAF, simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures, best practices in the functioning of the resident coordinator system, and the role of the United Nations system in capacity-building and poverty eradication.

[41] In-country dialogue for the assessments requires a substantial re-engineering, with greater involvement of national authorities and system representatives, not to mention the other development stakeholders. See Jehan Raheem, "Impact of capacity-building" in *Capacity-building and Poverty Eradication: Some Analysis of and Lessons from Evaluations of United Nations System Support to Countries' Efforts* (United Nations publication, forthcoming).

[42] Stronger methodological preparation at the field level may be required.

[43] See W. H. North, op. cit., in particular the section on alternative approaches to United Nations system-wide impact evaluation.

Annex I

Focus areas of reports on operational activities for development

Reports of the last 12 years on operational activities focused on the following areas:

- **Global challenges to United Nations development cooperation**, including relations with globalization processes, follow-up to global conferences and the United Nations Millennium Declaration;
- **Substantive role of United Nations operational activities in specific development areas**, for example, human development (see A/47/419, sect. III), science and technology, research and development, and transfer of technology (see A/47/319/Add.1), gender,[a] poverty eradication[b] and capacity-building;[c]
- **Resources and funding for operational activities for development**, including trends in funding United Nations funds and programmes and their financial status, pledging mechanisms, multi-year funding frameworks and other funding arrangements of United Nations funds and programmes;
- **Integration of operational activities in national development efforts**, including collaboration with national Governments, dialogue with other national stakeholders, training and human resources development, and relations between national ownership and capacity-building and between national execution and capacity-building;
- **Programme coordination issues**, including the notion of an integrated operational response;[d] such modalities such as the programme approach;[e] a number of coordination processes, such as the harmonization of programming cycles; strategic and programming frameworks, such as the country strategy note,[f] the common country assessment and the United Nations development assistance framework; the relations of such frameworks with other schemes, such as common appeal processes, poverty reduction strategy papers, public investment or expenditure plans, sector-wide approaches and the country assistance strategy (World Bank); and other coordination arrangements, such as round tables and consultative group meetings;
- **Field-level coordination**, including strengthening national coordination mechanisms, support for external assistance coordination, the resident coordinator system, field-level committees, thematic groups, simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures, decentralization and delegation of authority, field structures and staff, common premises and shared services, specialized and technical agencies, accountability and coordination in monitoring and evaluation, and collaboration with international financial institutions, particularly with the Bretton Woods institutions;
- **Evolving dimensions of operations activities**, including gender mainstreaming in operational activities; regional dimensions; relations among relief assistance, rehabilitation, reconstruction efforts and development cooperation; technical and economic cooperation among developing countries;

relations with civil society and human rights, including the right to development; and information and communication technologies;

- **Intergovernmental oversight of operational activities**, including the role of the Economic and Social Council and its relations with the executive boards.

Notes

[a] A special theme for the operational activities segment of the Economic and Social Council in 1998 (see E/1998/100 and Council resolution 1998/26).

[b] A key topic in the operational activities segment of the Council in 1999 (see E/1999/55) and one of the main topics in the second series of impact evaluation studies.

[c] A recurrent subject in the assessment of the effectiveness of operational activities: it was a key theme in the 1992 triennial review (see A/47/419/Add.1), in the impact evaluation studies mandated by General Assembly resolution 50/120 and in the operational activities segment for 2002.

[d] Emerged from General Assembly resolution 44/211 and was discussed in the 1992 triennial review (see A/47/419).

[e] Addressed in General Assembly resolutions 47/192 and 50/120.

[f] Received special attention from 1992 to 1998.

Annex II

Short-term assessment activities: requests contained in General Assembly resolution 56/201

1. The **report requirements** defined in General Assembly resolution 56/201, which define the content of a short-term assessment programme on operational activities for development, are the following:

- **Capacity-building**: review of the efforts of United Nations system organizations in the capacity-building area (para. 28), due for the Economic and Social Council in 2002;
- **Lessons learning and evaluation mechanisms of the United Nations funds, programmes and agencies**: evaluation of the extent to which those organizations at the field level learn lessons from their evaluations, with proposals to improve feedback mechanisms at the country level (para. 56), due for the Economic and Social Council in 2003;
- **Simplification and harmonization of rules and procedures** for operational activities. Sub-themes: decentralization and delegation of authority; financial regulations; procedures for implementing programmes and projects, in particular requirements for monitoring and reporting; common shared services in country offices; and recruitment, training and remuneration of national project personnel (paras. 57-65). Reporting to the Economic and Social Council in 2002 is expected as regards the initiatives promoted, in particular on the programme of work adopted by the United Nations funds and programmes. Evaluation of achievements is expected for 2004;
- **Common country assessment and UNDAF**: evaluation of the progress of the common country assessment and UNDAF processes and their impact on operational activities (para. 47), as a part of the 2004 triennial review;
- **Pledging conferences**: alternative options on the pledging conferences (para. 26) for consideration by the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session.

2. Moreover, a number of **principles** and concepts are highlighted in the resolution, which are considered essential in planning, implementing, coordinating and evaluating operational activities for development. They are key criteria for the assessment:

- **National ownership** of operational activities and their integration with national development efforts (para. 3);
- Country-level relevance of the international **commitments, goals and targets of the Millennium Declaration and major United Nations conferences**, and role of the United Nations development system in supporting national efforts to implement them (second preambular paragraph and paras. 6, 8, 10, 13, 38, 42 and 72);
- **Need for a participatory approach to United Nations development cooperation** as a condition for its sustainability, expressed both in terms of participation and leadership of national Governments and partnerships with all relevant development actors, within the system and with reference to

international national partners (third preambular paragraph and paras. 3, 4, 7, 31, 34, 35, 43, 44, 46, 49, 50, 54, 69, 70, 73, 76 and 78).

3. **Additional themes** identified in General Assembly resolution 56/201 which are relevant for the effectiveness of the operational activities include:

- Role of the United Nations system in assisting recipient countries in responding to the **challenges of globalization**, supporting their efforts to integrate in the world economy, to accelerate their economic growth and development and to reduce their poverty (para. 11);
- Role of the United Nations system in supporting the enhancement of developing countries' capacities in the areas of **information and communication technology** (para. 13);
- Request for **new trust funds** established by United Nations funds and programmes to be possibly multi-donor and not to the detriment of core/regular resources (para. 23);
- Importance of **disseminating expertise acquired through technical assistance** (para. 29);
- Fullest possible use of available **national expertise and indigenous technologies** (para. 30);
- Need to enhance **capacity of national Governments to coordinate external assistance** (para. 31);
- Need to enhance **evaluation capacities of recipient countries** (para. 49);
- Need to evaluate **transaction costs of coordination activities** borne by recipient countries and system organizations and assessment of costs as compared with total programme expenditures (para. 51);
- **Role of the resident coordinator system for an effective and efficient functioning of the United Nations system** at the country level, and as a key instrument of coordination of the system's operational activities for development (para. 66);
- **Role of the resident coordinator system to assist Governments in implementing the Millennium Declaration and outcomes of major United Nations conferences** (para. 72);
- **Broadening of the pool of resident coordinators** (gender balance, competitive assessment, system participation in the recruitment process and in the expression of new candidates) (para. 67);
- Use of the **United Nations Staff College** by the United Nations development system (para. 68);
- **Use of information and communication technologies (ICT) by the United Nations development system at the country level** as a means to support efficient delivery of development cooperation and harmonization of ICT platforms at the country and headquarters levels (paras. 69, 80 and 81);
- Progress in the area of **common premises and shared services** (e.g., para. 79, on common premises);

- **Collaboration with Bretton Woods institutions and other international financial institutions** (paras. 44, 70 and 77);
- **Regional dimensions** of operational activities and involvement of regional commissions (e.g., para. 88);
- Interaction between operational activities for development and **humanitarian assistance** (para. 82);
- **Mainstreaming gender dimensions** in operational activities for development (para. 85);
- **Use of technical and economic cooperation among developing countries** in operational activities for development (paras. 89 and 90).